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Justice as Self-Transmitting Power and Just Acts in *Republic* 4

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In his influential paper "A Fallacy in Plato's *Republic*," David Sachs charged Plato with committing a fallacy of irrelevancy.¹ Plato's Socrates is asked to show that justice understood as acting in conformity with conventional morality, so-called vulgar justice, is beneficial to the just person. Socrates actually demonstrates something else, namely that psychic justice, a state of internal harmony between parts of the soul, is beneficial to its possessor. A generation of Plato scholarship has reacted to Sachs' reading of the *Republic* by using discussions of moral psychology and education elsewhere in the dialogue to bridge the gap between psychic justice and a conception of justice centered on the performance of moral actions.² This paper presents a different way of responding to Sachs' paper. *Republic* 4 contains not two but only one conception of justice, according to which justice is a power in the soul of individuals. Justice is a power whose nature it is to transmit itself to cities which achieve civic justice as they are formed by just individuals. Just actions which promote the good of others are the medium by which justice transmits itself to cities.

It is necessary first to explain the notion of a self-transmitting power, a power which operates by making other things like itself. A simple example of a self-transmitting power is heat; anything which has heat is hot, and this quality of heat characteristically acts on other objects to make them hot as well. As Socrates says in Book 1, the function of heat is to make other things hot (335d). He also describes justice as a self-transmitting power in Book 1 in one of the positive arguments offered for the superiority of the life of the just person over that of the unjust.³ Socrates at 351b-352d claims that just people are

¹ David Sachs, "A Fallacy in Plato's *Republic*," in Vlastos, ed. *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays*, vol. II (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1971), 35-51. Hereafter referred to as Sachs, "Fallacy".

² Instances of this sort of response to Sachs are found in Raphael Demos, "A Fallacy in Plato's *Republic*?" in Vlastos, ed. *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company), 52-6; Gregory Vlastos, "Justice and Happiness in the *Republic*," in Vlastos, ed. *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 66-95; Richard Kraut, "Reason and Justice in Plato's *Republic*," in Lee, Mourelatos, and Rorty, eds. *Exegesis and Argument: Studies in Greek Philosophy, Phronesis Supplement* 1(1973), 207-24; John Cooper, "The Psychology of Justice in Plato," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977), 151-7; Eric Brown, "Minding the Gap in Plato's *Republic*," *Philosophical Studies* 117, 275-302; and Rachel Singpurwalla, "Plato's Defense of Justice in the *Republic*," in Santas, ed. *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2006) 263-282. Notable exceptions to this body of literature are Julia Annas, "Plato and Common Morality," *The Classical Quarterly* 28 (1978), 437-51 and Nicholas D. Smith, "Plato's Analogy of Soul and State," *Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999), 31-49, which do not construe the arguments of *Republic* 4 as attempts to connect two distinct conceptions of justice.

³ The observation that justice in *Republic* 1 is treated as a self-transmitting power is also found in the work of other scholars. See Kimon Lycos, *Plato on Justice and Power* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 103-5. The present claim that justice is a self-transmitting power can be seen as a reworking of Lycos' claim that "Socrates ... wants to convince his interlocutors that there must be an 'internal' relation between justice and power if the ordinary belief that justice is part of human excellence is to be rationally grounded"; Lycos, *Plato on Justice and Power*, 74. Sarah Waterlow, "The Good of Others

more powerful and capable of acting than the unjust. He asks whether there is a connection between the political supremacy Thrasymachus admires and justice: “Will a city that becomes stronger than another have this power without justice, or is justice necessary for it to have this power?”⁴ The following considerations support the latter alternative: a group of people acting for a common goal, whether as a military formation or even a band of thieves, will not be able to accomplish their end if they are riven by injustice, the function of which (*ergon*, 351d8) is to produce hatred and conflicts in groups. Justice, on the other hand, produces concord and friendship. Since the function of injustice is to produce conflict, its presence in a single person will result in that person losing control over himself (351d-e). The opposite occurs in the case of the just, who are more capable or powerful in acting. In this argument-sketch Socrates articulates the results of being just in terms of promoting concord and friendship within individuals. The groups to which these individuals belong then enjoy similar benefits. Even the deeds of a group of criminals must be traced back to the limited presence of justice in the individual criminals (352c). Apparently, justice is present at the basic level in individuals, where it produces its characteristic effects of concord and friendship. Justice thus present in individuals counteracts the hatred and conflict between individuals that is produced by whatever injustice infects their association. In thus counteracting conflict and hatred between individuals, justice produces concord and friendship at the group level. This short argument allows us to characterize justice at 351b-352d as a self-transmitting power. Justice is or has a power which generates concord and friendship within the just person, and these traits associated with the just person are transmitted to the city or group to which he belongs.

When the fuller defense of justice arrives in *Republic* 4, we find that Socrates continues to describe justice as a self-transmitting power. Justice in the city is described as a power: “It is the power [*dunamis*] that makes it possible for [moderation, courage, and wisdom] to grow in the city and that preserves them when they’ve grown for as long as it remains there itself.”⁵ Like justice in Book 1, the justice present in the best city exists because justice is present in the soul of individual members of the city (435a-e). Once Socrates and Glaucon agree that the soul contains the same parts as the city, Socrates spells out what it is for a human being to be just: “Then we must also remember that each one of us in whom each part is doing its own work will himself be just and do his own.”⁶ Socrates concludes his search for an account of justice in the soul by asking Glaucon, “Then, are you still looking for justice to be something other than this power, the one that produces men and cities of the sort we’ve described?”⁷ As in Book 1, the

in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 73 (1972-3), 29-30 points out that justice in Book 4 of the *Republic* is a self-propagating trait. Rachana Kamtekar, “The Powers of Plato’s Tripartite Psychology,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2008), 127-50 characterizes virtues in Book 4 as powers that allow the three parts of the soul to attain their best condition.

⁴ 351b7-9. All translations are by Grube as revised by Reeve in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1997). Citations of the Greek text are taken from *Platonis Rempublicam*, ed. Slings (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) in the Oxford Classical Texts series.

⁵ 433b8-10

⁶ 441d11-e1

⁷ 443b4-5

genesis of political justice can be traced from its origin in the soul of the just person to its full growth in the justice of the city.

After Socrates and Glaucon agree at 442d8-10 that justice in the soul is no different from justice in the city, they proceed to test this account of justice by examining whether such a just person would be likely to commit typically unjust actions. This passage at 442d11-443b4, which I will refer to as the test passage, plays a particular role in Sachs' account of Socrates' defense of justice. According to Sachs, for Socrates' account of psychic justice to be relevant to his assigned task of defending vulgar justice, it must be the case that a person who exhibits psychic justice will also exemplify vulgar justice. The test passage is the main text in which Plato shows an awareness of the need to connect psychic justice with vulgar justice:

The passage shows that Plato supposes that the just man – as he conceives him – is less likely than anyone else to perform those acts, to embezzle, thief, betray, behave sacrilegiously, fail to keep oaths or agreements, commit adultery, neglect his parents or the service he owes to the gods. Plato thinks the conduct of his just man, far from being at variance with the vulgar conception of justice, will exemplify it.⁸

But, Sachs observes, this claim that the psychically just man will exemplify vulgar justice is only an assumption unsupported with further argument. It is an implausible assumption because there is nothing to prevent a psychically just man from committing an act commonly recognized as unjust in an intelligent, courageous, and self-controlled way.

According to Sachs, the vulgar criteria of justice (not stealing, not betraying friends and city, not lying, avoiding disrespect to family and the gods) are mentioned in order to test whether the man who exhibits psychic justice will also exemplify vulgar justice. The function of the test passage is to bridge the gap between psychic justice and vulgar justice. But if we look at the passage preceding the test passage, we find a different answer to the question of what is being tested. At 442b-d, Socrates and Glaucon agree that the tripartite psychology developed in Book 4 allows for convincing accounts of the four cardinal virtues. A person is courageous because of her spirited part's holding on to beliefs about what is and is not to be feared, wise because of her rational part ruling for the good of the whole soul, and moderate because of the agreement between parts of the soul as to which part should rule. Then Socrates and Glaucon agree on a formal description, couched in terms that recall the tripartite structure of the city, of what it is for a human being to be just: "And, of course, a person will be just because of what we've so often mentioned, and in that way. – Necessarily. – Well, then, is the justice in us at all indistinct? Does it seem to be something different from what we found in the city? – It doesn't seem so to me."⁹ For justice Socrates refers back to what he has "so often mentioned," apparently the account of justice in a human being at 441d4-e1 according to which a person is just in virtue of each part of her soul doing its own work. The notion that justice amounts to each part doing its own has been so often mentioned because it was employed in the description of the best city, starting in Book 2. That each class in the city should do what it is best suited to do was claimed at 433a to be central to justice in

⁸ Sachs, "Fallacy," 37.

⁹ 442d5-10

the city. Now at 441d Socrates asserts that the basic principle of each part doing its own is fundamental to psychic justice.

The test passage provides confirmation of this theory-laden account of justice. It begins with the following proposal from Socrates: “If there are still any doubts in our soul about this [i.e., whether justice in the soul is the same as justice in the city], we could dispel them altogether by appealing to ordinary [or vulgar, *fortika*] cases.”¹⁰ Just as we may test a proposed chemical analysis of water as composed of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom by asking whether a mass of molecules constructed according to the formula H₂O will be a tasteless, colorless, potable, thirst-quenching liquid at room temperature, so Socrates tests the “each part does its own” formula by considering whether a person to whose soul this formula applies is likely to perform the acts we normally associate with justice. The appeal to ordinary or vulgar cases is not a scientifically precise test, because a just person may in particular cases lie or refuse to return deposited property to its owner (331b-e, 382c-d, 414b-415d, 459c-e). However, the appeal to cases of just and unjust action serves to give rough confirmation of the proposed definition of justice. The function of the test passage is to test the correctness of Socrates’ theoretical account of justice, not to show that anyone who exhibits justice according to this theoretical account will also exemplify a second conception of justice.

Although Sachs misconstrues the role of the test passage, his paper raises the larger issue of the proper relation between justice conceived as psychic order and the actions we expect a just person to perform. Socrates recommends to us a state of psychic order as an essential component of our happiness. It remains unclear exactly how this state of psychic order relates to the sorts of actions mentioned in the test passage, actions by which a person promotes the good of others. There must be a connection between justice and such action, and in addition it must be the right sort of connection. It is possible to act in accordance with a moral requirement of promoting the good of others without acting out of proper concern for this moral requirement. If psychic justice required its possessor merely to act in accordance with the good of others for reasons unknown, then we cannot yet say that a proper link between psychic justice and moral action has been forged. The test passage alone does not secure this link; as we have seen, its function is not to confirm that a person who possesses psychic justice will also exemplify a distinct conception of justice centered around the performance of moral actions.

As a result of forty years of Platonic scholarship, it should be clear that the *Republic* offers ample resources for forging this connection between justice as a psychic state and moral action. Commentators have shown that the moral psychology and theory of education contained in other parts of the *Republic* provide sufficient support for the claims made in the test passage.¹¹ For instance, John Cooper focuses on the claim that the just person serves the form of goodness, the source of rational order, and not his own happiness:

[A] just person is a devotee of the good, not his own good; and these are very different things. Knowing the good, what he wants is to advance the reign of rational order in the world as a whole, so far as by his own efforts,

¹⁰ 442d11-e2

¹¹ See the works mentioned in footnote 2.

alone or together with others, he can do this. He recognizes a single criterion of choice: What, given the circumstances, will be most likely to maximize the total amount of rational order in the world as a whole?¹² Cooper and other scholars have shown that Socrates has access to arguments which support his assertion in the test passage that the just person will normally perform stereotypically just actions.¹³ However, the fact that Socrates could develop such arguments does not show that he would in fact appeal to such arguments if asked to clarify the connection between psychic justice and just actions. I hope to show that Book 4 contains the resources for asserting an important connection between justice and just actions. Justice is a self-transmitting power that is based in the justice of individual souls and which makes the associations formed by these individuals just. This self-transmitting power expresses itself in the form of just action, action which promotes the good of others, as it makes the city just.

To see how Plato wishes to forge the connection between justice and moral action, it will be helpful to draw upon the passage 443c9-444a2:

One who is just does not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other.... He puts himself in order, is his own friend, and harmonizes the three parts of himself like three limiting notes in a musical scale – high, low, and middle. He binds together those parts and any others there may be in between, and from having been many things he becomes entirely one, moderate and harmonious. Only then does he act. And when he does anything, whether acquiring wealth, taking care of his body, engaging in politics, or in private contracts – in all of these, he believes that the action is just and fine that preserves this inner harmony and helps achieve it, and calls it so, and regards as wisdom the knowledge that oversees such actions.

This passage asserts a distinctive connection between justice as an internal psychic activity and external actions affecting other persons. Being just is a particular way of ruling oneself and ordering the different parts of oneself. It is compared to musical harmonies between varied musical notes and the achievement of friendship with oneself; this comparison recalls Book 1, where Socrates ascribed to justice the distinctive product of friendship between different elements of a person or group. As in Book 1, justice as a state of order internal to a person generates a distinctive way of acting with others. The just person acts in relation to others, either in acquiring money or entering private contracts or engaging in politics, only if these actions preserve and foster the state of psychic justice.

¹² John Cooper, "The Psychology of Justice in Plato," in *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 145.

¹³ Other works which describe the philosopher-rulers of the *Republic* as motivated by knowledge of the forms to act without special concern for their own interest include Richard Kraut, "The Defense of Justice in the *Republic*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 323-4; Kraut, "Egoism, Love, and Political Office in Plato," *Philosophical Review* 82: 1973, 330-44; Norman Dahl, "Plato's Defense of Justice," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Review* 51 (1991), 809-834; and Nicholas White, *A Companion to Plato's Republic* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979), 43-54.

These actions are mostly of the same type as those mentioned in the test passage: gaining money, entering into private contracts, and engaging in political affairs involve the just person in dealings with others in which the good of those others is promoted. Acquiring money will involve providing some good or service to others in exchange for money, contracts and private associations with others have their point in the provision of benefit for both parties, and engaging in political affairs leads to providing services to the city, perhaps by holding public office. The performance of these just actions flows from and preserves the justice of individual souls, and this justice of souls is also responsible for the justice of the cities formed by these individuals. The best city in which each class does its own work will be constituted by the farmers, smiths, and carpenters of the money-making class who acquire money in a just manner, by auxiliaries who take up the political task of fighting for the city, and by guardians who exercise wisdom in directing these activities. The distinctive functions of these three parts of the city are mentioned in the discussion of just actions at 443e3-441a1, thus ensuring that a city in which these just actions are carried out will be a just city. Thus, just actions serve to transmit justice from souls to cities.

According to Socrates, justice as a psychic state is related to the good of others as a power is related to the means through which it achieves its natural result. A just city is the natural result of psychic justice. Promoting the good of others is a means through which psychic justice operates and not the defining end of psychic justice because, as Socrates tells us at 443e, the just person identifies just actions not as those actions which will promote the good of others but as those actions which will preserve and achieve psychic justice. Just actions are fine or noble, but they have this positive aspect as acts that lead on to more psychic justice, not simply as actions promoting the good of others. Yet the benefit of others is, if not the defining end of justice, still the fitting medium through which justice operates. In order for justice to transmit itself from the psyche of individuals to the level of the city, individuals must carry out just actions. These just actions will promote the good of others, and the connection between psychic justice and just actions will not be accidental. At 443b1-2, Socrates asserts that the condition of soul of the just person, with each part doing its own task, is the cause for or reason why (*aition*) the just person will perform the just actions mentioned in the test passage. Just and moral action that promotes the good of others is a way station on the road between justice of soul and justice in the city.

The following objection must be answered. On the present account, the person possessing psychic justice carries out just and moral actions with the intention to promote justice, that is, her own psychic justice and the analogously related justice of the city to which she belongs. This does not yet give us the right connection between psychic justice and moral action. Moral action is action motivated essentially by concern for the good of others, and Plato has not yet established a connection between psychic justice and this sort of action. To this objection Plato can reply as follows. It is false that moral or right action is defined essentially by concern for the good of others; many foolish or unwise people are genuinely concerned to promote the good of others around them but fail miserably due to their lack of excellences of character such as justice and wisdom. The just person acts with the concern to promote justice, her own and that of the political community she supports by being just. If the good of others is reliably promoted in the process of transmitting justice from the soul of the just person to the community to which

she belongs, as the passage 443c-444a and the test passage assert, then enough has been done to secure the good of others. This is true even if promoting the good of others is an unintended consequence of the just person's focus on justice understood as having and doing one's own.

Since the publication of Sachs' paper, numerous scholars have looked to other sections of the *Republic* to secure the connection between being just and acting justly. These investigations have enriched our understanding of various facets of the dialogue. Yet precisely because they call upon sections of the *Republic* external to Book 4, we should wonder if an alternative reading of the connection between justice and just action is possible, one that is rooted more firmly in the concepts in play in *Republic* 4. Such a reading is at hand if we explore the implications of treating justice as a self-transmitting power, one that is based in the justice of individual souls and which makes the associations and political communities formed by these individuals just.